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ABSTRACT

To prepare student stage managers for the world of theater outside the university, faculty directors should endow them with full authority. Using the Actors Equity Association rules book as a guide, faculty directors should make stage managers aware of their duties and then leave them to perform them without close supervision. Unfortunately, in most cases, student stage managers function only as an extension of the faculty director, who takes on the "real" responsibility; for either lack of trust in the student, or a misguided sense of purpose, the faculty member is the "genuine" stage manager as well as the director. Student stage managers are further disadvantaged by the fact that they are given no formal training in college curriculums. Most of them learn by apprenticing themselves to a more experienced student. At this point, the most effective thing that can be done for undergraduate stage managers is to get them excited about their work. Endow them with authority in front of the cast and crew. Let them understand that stage management is a powerful career gateway. Rather than representing it as a fall back alternative to acting or directing, make them aware of the many opportunities to be gainfully employed in an important profession. (TB)

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Instructional Resources for Training Undergraduate Students in
Stage Management

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In any examination of this subject we must first answer the question, what is the source of undergraduate stage managers? It has been my experience that students assigned to the task of stage management come from one of four possible student groups. These groups can be broken down into the following categories, bright students who happen to be extremely organized, natural leaders, theatre majors who embrace a well rounded experience and clueless students who are naive enough to take the job.

A more intense look at these types of students reveals more detailed information about the students ability to perform successfully in the assigned task. A bright student with outstanding organizational skills can fulfill some of the responsibilities necessary, however, they may not possess many of the other attributes necessary to function effectively. The same statement holds true for students from any group thrust into the position of stage manager.

This brings us to a point where we must look at the realities that face the student stage manager in the academic environment. There is little or no training being done on the undergraduate level. For the most part, student stage managers get their training "on the job". This is a particularly dangerous situation because we expect the student to know what is required of them yet we provide no formal training for them. Perhaps the most we do is give the student a copy of a book on the subject and hope that they will read it and apply the techniques. Maybe the most positive experience students get is to work under another experienced student stage manager who has learned by the "initiation by fire" method. In my opinion, this points to a drastic deficiency on the part of our training programs in theatre.

It has been my experience that student stage managers simply become extensions of the faculty director or choreographer. In this way the student simply carries out tasks assigned to them by the faculty member. Indeed it is the faculty member who takes on the "real" responsibility, and, for either a lack of trust in the student, or a misguided sense of purpose, the faculty member is the "genuine" stage manager as well as director. In this way students are given the responsibilities of stage management without the authority to be effective as a leader of their peers.

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This is not to say that there are not some very effective student stage managers that have been mentored and have had the self motivation to become highly effective stage managers. It is the intent of this document to provide some resources, philosophies and real world techniques for students and educators.

Often students are thrust into these positions of responsibility without any tools to help them achieve the demands of the job. The very first thing that we can do as educators is to empower our student stage managers. This means to go beyond just giving them a title, we must give them the responsibility that stage managers typically have. They must also be given the authority to do the job. This should be done publicly in the presence of the cast and crew. This may mean two things to the faculty member. First, faculty members may have to find out exactly what the stage managers responsibilities are in contrast to the director. I suggest using the profession as a model. Second, faculty members will need to give up what they typically consider part of their responsibility to the stage manager and trust that the student is competent. This may prove to be an uncomfortable position to take, however, I believe that this is necessary for true learning to take place. With this in mind, hire/find a good stage manager, let them do their job and hold them accountable.

The most difficult obstacle concerning effective stage management is the lack of knowledge in regards to exactly what stage managers do. I believe the best way to prepare students is by offering a class in stage management that includes a practicum component. As this may not be possible, make accessible to the student, resources for self teaching of this highly specialized form of management. Above all, emphasize their level of involvement. Cause the stage manager to play an active role in the rehearsal process. Publicly elevate them to the same level as another faculty member. Of course the stage manager is still a student, however, if publicly they are treated by faculty with that level of respect, they will be offered that same level of respect by their peers, thus allowing them to be truly effective. A mature student will not "power trip" with this new found authority, however other students may need more faculty guidance. This "guidance" should always be done privately as not to diminish the stage managers authority.

I have found that the most powerful way to bring respect and add a level a professionalism to any director/stage manager team is to make a connection between the students experience and the "industry". Provide for the stage manager AEA rule books (Actors Equity Association). They cost only five dollars each. There are several contracts available, choose one that most appropriately reflects your venue. They can use these books as guides to bridge the gap between the educational theatre and the

professional theater. As we are in the business of preparing students for the world, it seems clear that we should apprise them of what the world will expect of them. This is but one powerful way to do it. Keep them aware of the world beyond academic theatre by keeping on hand trade magazines, newsletters and any information that keeps them in touch with the "industry".

Stage management is a very powerful career gateway. Membership in AEA (Actors Equity Association) can be accomplished through stage managing. It is my opinion that stage managers meet more directors than anyone else in the business. If a student has a desire to become a director or you suspect a student has directing talent encourage them to stage manage. Directors are always looking for good stage managers. Many times, a director will pass a job along to a stage manager if they know the stage manager has an interest in directing. Directing is a natural outgrowth of stage managing.

Stage management builds a foundation for leadership. An effective stage manager can move in many directions. Good stage managers are aware of all aspects of production due to the very nature of the job. Many a stage manager have become, directors, producers, personal assistants, production managers, artistic directors, casting agents, executive directors and theatre managers.

The most effective thing we can do for our undergraduate stage managers is to get them excited about the work. The most effective way is to have them start thinking about the profession. Making a connection between what the student is doing in school and how it translates into a real world opportunity often amplifies the students motivation. If you have students that could succeed in stage management talk to them about working towards building credits that will gain them entrance into the profession. A word of caution, do not represent stage management as a fall back alternative. Only those who truly desire to be stage managers will succeed. Expose them to the various venues in which they can be gainfully employed, Broadway, off Broadway, off off Broadway, regional theatre, national and international touring and theme parks. When students realize that potential exists for them to work in such exciting places their excitement will be a wonderful source of energy. Follow through on this by encouraging them to apply for internships and apprenticeships in the profession during their summer break. These positions are not difficult for them to get and the student and the program will enjoy the dividends of that experience. ArtSearch is probably the best resource for these positions.

Included below is a listing of resources that can be of help in nurturing the student stage manager. It includes books, unions, and associations that are a source for information as well as specific techniques.

RESOURCE LISTING

ArtSearch Theatre Communications Group, New York
Bi-weekly publication of jobs, internships and apprenticeships in the performing arts.

Ionazzi, Daniel A. The Stage Management Handbook. Betterway Books, 1992
Comprehensive text for stage managers, includes sample forms, in depth discussions about professional venues and deals with human behavior in organizations.

Stern, Lawrence. Stage Management. Allyn and Bacon, 1991
Excellent introduction to stage management.

The New York Theatrical Sourcebook, Broadway Press, 1993
A must for anyone involved in theatrical production.

Actors Equity Association, 165 West 46th New York NY 10036 (7th floor) 212-719-9815; Chicago 312-641-0393; Los Angeles 213-962-9788; San Francisco 415-391-3838
Hours 9:30 - 5:00 Mon-Fri (local time all locations)
Equity Rule books and contracts, \$5.00 each

Center for Safety in the Arts
5 Beekman Street (Park-Row Nassau)
New York, NY 10038

Directors Guild of America
110 West 57th Street (6-7th floors)
New York, NY 10019
National union representing film and television directors and assistant directors

International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE)

1515 Broadway # 601

New York, NY 10036

International union representing stagehands, carpenters, electricians, property masters, projectionists, and wardrobe masters.

Stage Managers Association

P.O. Box 2234

Times Square Station

New York, NY 10108-2020

212-691-5633

An association for professional union and non-union stage managers. Information and skill seminars given. Newsletter published with list of job openings. Projects include "Operation Observation", in which stage managers observe their peers working backstage; also publishes The Stage Managers Directory.